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Hebrew Parallels to Indian Folktales

Dan Ben-Amos

University of Pennsylvania, dbamos@sas.upenn.edu

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At the time of this publication, Dr. Ben-Amos was affiliated with Indiana University, but he is now a faculty member of the University of Pennsylvania.

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Abstract

Historically speaking, the beginning of the Jewish relationships with India are unknown and undocumented. Traditionally and folkloristically, they are dated in various periods in Jewish history. The unidentified destinies for the voyages of Kings Solomon and Hiram¹ were often interpreted as India. The exile of the Ten Tribes (719 B.C.) and the destruction of the First Temple (586 B.C.) with the dispersion of the Jews following it, has often been taken as the starting point of Jewish immigration to India. However the contact between the two cultures can be explained by other causes than migration. When the Jews lived in Persia during the empire of King Xerxe I (519?-465 B.C.), which was said to expand from "India to Ethiopia" (Esther 1 : 1), they might have been in commercial, political and hence cultural contact with India. However, in spite of these imaginative hypotheses, there is not even a single piece of historical evidence which could validate them beyond any doubt.²

Disciplines

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At the time of this publication, Dr. Ben-Amos was affiliated with Indiana University, but he is now a faculty member of the University of Pennsylvania.

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Hebrew Parallels to Indian Folktales

By

DAN BEN-AMOS

Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana

Historically speaking, the beginning of Jewish relationships with India are unknown and undocumented. Traditionally and folkloristically, they are dated in various periods in Jewish history. The unidentified destinies for the voyages of Kings Solomon and Hiram¹ were often interpreted as India. The exile of the Ten Tribes (719 B.C.) and the destruction of the First Temple (586 B.C.) with the dispersion of the Jews following it, has often been taken as the starting point of Jewish immigration to India. However the contact between the two cultures can be explained by other causes than migration. When the Jews lived in Persia during the empire of King Xerxe I (519?-465 B.C.), which was said to expand from "India unto Ethiopia" (Esther 1 : 1), they might have been in commercial, political and hence cultural contact with India. However, in spite of these imaginative hypotheses, there is not even a single piece of historical evidence which could validate them beyond any doubt.²

In spite of this gap in historical documentation, Jewish and Indian folklore share many common motifs, tales, and legends. Under the impact of Th. Benefy's theory, scholars have attempted to investigate the influence of Indian on Jewish folklore. Indeed, the Panchatantra, as well as other Indian folktale collections, has been translated into Hebrew from Arabic and Persian and carried into Europe. *Kalilah and Dimnah* was translated into Hebrew in the 13th century as well as the *Book of the Seven Sages*.³ However, Indian tales, transmitted orally to Palestine, were known among the Jews in that area much earlier. Rabbi Meir, a Jewish Palestinian sage from the second century A.D. was known to tell "three hundred fox-parables."⁴ About another sage it was told that he narrated a hundred fox parables in a wedding party till all the dishes cooled and the guests

¹ See I Kings 9 : 28, 10 : 22, 10 : 11, Isaiah 2 : 16 Jona 1 : 3, 4 : 2, Job 22 : 24.

² For an extensive English Bibliography concerning these problems see Walter J. Fischel, *The Jews in India*, Hebrew (Jerusalem, 1960), pp. 9-10, notes 1-3.

³ They were published in 19th and 20th centuries. *Kalilah and Dimnah*, ed. Divnburg (Paris, 1881). *Tales of Sindbad*, ed. P. Cassel, (Paris, 1891), ed. A. Haberman (Tel-Aviv, 1946).

⁴ Grimm, eds. J. Bolte and G. Polivka (Leipzig, 1930) Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin, p. 38.

did not eat a thing.⁵ In this context the reference was probably to animal parables in general and not the fox in particular.⁶ Nevertheless, an immediate association with the Panchatantra was inevitable. But of all the folklore genres the parables were the least suitable for proving an Indian influence. The Hellenistic world and especially Greece were as fond of plant and animal parables as the Indians. Being aware of the multi-directions that folktale transmission may take, present scholars avoid any generalization concerning Indian and Jewish folktale relationships. Nevertheless, any comparative discussion of this subject points out immediately many parallelisms and versions of the same tale found in both traditions.⁷

This comparative survey of Indian and Jewish folktales and parables does not aim at a thorough discussion of both traditions. Such a study, much in need, requires competence in both Hebrew and Indian languages. Even when one tradition is available in translation only, as in this case, it would extend to a work which is much beyond the scope of a paper.

As a pragmatic framework for this kind of comparative study, I have chosen A. Aarne and S. Thompson, *The Types of the Folktale*, revised edition (Helsinki, 1961), and Dov Noy "Greek and Indian Parallels to Talmudic Midrashic parables."⁸ Thus, the survey attempts to analyze only those types and parables which the above bibliographers refer to Indian and Hebrew sources. The latter work is arranged alphabetically according to the Hebrew order and hence for classificatory purposes the system of Walter Wienert *Die Typen der Griechisch Romischen Fabel*, FFC, 56. (Helsinki, 1925), will be adopted. Moreover, it is beyond the scope of this paper to assemble all the versions of Hebrew or English translations of Indian tales. As a working minimum only one version of each tradition will be compared. The scope of this paper is, hence, very limited and any generalizations can not be drawn of it. The work is limited by the very fact that it is based mainly on a Bibliographical work of European and American scholars who read neither Hebrew nor Indian languages. So far as the Hebrew sources are concerned, S. Thompson refers to two main works: M. Gaster, *The Exempla of the Rabbis* (Leipzig and London, 1927), and M. J. Bin Gorion *Der Born Judas: Legenden, Marchen und Erzählungen*, 6 vols. (Leipzig, 1918-23).⁹ The former collection is based

⁵ A. Cohen, ed. *Midrash Rabba Ecclesiastes*, (London, 1939) pp. 9-10, and J. Israelstam and Judah J. Slotki eds. *Midrash Rabba Leviticus* (London, 1939) pp. 359-360. See also L. Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia, 1909-1938), p. 389-390.

⁶ See Bernard Heller "Das hebraische und arabische Marchen," in *Anmerkungen zu den kinder—U. Hausmarchen der Bruder*, IV, 286-365.

⁷ See L. Ginzberg, *On Law and Lore*, Hebrew (Tel-Aviv, 1960), p. 253 and Emanuel Bin Gorion, *An Introduction to Jewish and International Folktales*, Hebrew (Jerusalem, 1950), pp. 103-110.

⁸ In *Tale-Types and Motifs of Animal Tales*, (Jerusalem, 1960), pp. 77-79.

⁹ Throughout this paper the references are given to the Hebrew edition of this work. M. J. Bin Gorion, *From the Source of Israel*, Hebrew, 2nd ed. (Jerusalem, 1952).

on a manuscript written probably in the 13th century and discovered by the author. The text itself is in Hebrew but M. Gaster has added English synopses and comparative annotation. The latter work is an anthology of folktales which draws its material from rare Hebrew chapbooks and collections of tales circulated in oral tradition.

The Indian versions of these compared tales are taken from various books which are listed in S. Thompson and W. Roberts, *Types of Indic Tales*, FFC. 180 (Helsinki, 1960).

Type 52 *The Ass Without a Heart*¹⁰

*Hebrew version*¹¹

- a. The ass is a tax-collector in Egypt.
- b. He insists on collecting tax from the linn, the king of the animals, and the fox, his minister.
- c. The fox tries to persuade him, unsuccessfully, to let the lion pass without paying tax.
- d. The lion kills the ass and cuts its body to pieces.
- e. The fox eats the ass's heart.
- f. When asked by the lion, he answers : such a stupid ass could not have a heart.

The story is interpreted allegorically : the ass symbolises Pharaoh, the fox stands for Moses, and the lion for God himself. The story illustrates the Biblical verse of Exodus 5 : 1-2.

*Indian version*¹²

- a. A sick lion who cannot move from his den needs, as a remedy, to eat an ass's (deer's) heart and ears.
- b. The jackal tells the ass that he would have a good time in the forest (would be the next king) and thus brings him to the lion's den.
- c. The lion strikes the ass (deer) but the animal escapes.
- d. The Jackal brings him a second time to the lion's den.
- e. The lion kills the ass (deer), cuts it to pieces and goes to take a bath.
- f. The jackal eats in the meantime the animal's heart and ears.
- g. When asked, he answers : "Such a stupid ass could not have a heart (mind)."

Type 91 *Monkey (Cat) Who Left His Heart at Home*

¹⁰ See W. Wienert, Nos. ET. 83 : 85-109.

¹¹ M. Gaster, pp. 105, No. 244, D. Newman, *Motif-Index of Talmudic Midrashic Literature*, unpublished dissertation, (Bloomington, 1954), Motif K 402.3 "The Ass Without a Heart".

¹² N. M. Penzer, *The Ocean of Story* (London, 1923-28), V. 130-32. H. Parker, *Village Folktales of Ceylon*, (London, 1910), No. 68, pp. 359-363.

*Hebrew version*¹³

- a. The Angel of Death has to throw into the sea a pair of each species.
- b. The fox tricks the Angel of Death and escapes this fate.
- c. In an assembly of all sea animals the fox is missing. The leviathan sends fish to bring him so he would eat the fox's heart and acquire his shrewdness.
- d. The fish ask the fox to be their King and they carry him into the sea.
- e. Half-way in, he becomes suspicious and asks for the true reason for their message. They tell him.
- f. Why did not you tell me, he answers, and I would have brought my heart along; usually I leave it at home.
- g. They carry the fox back to the land.

The first Hebrew version was printed in the collection *Alphabet of Ben Sira* from the 12th century.

*Indian Version*¹⁴

- a. A friendship develops between a monkey and a porpoise.
- b. The porpoise's wife becomes jealous and pretends to be sick. The only cure for her is a monkey's heart.
- c. The porpoise invites his friend to his home.
- d. Half-way in, he tells his friend the true reason for his invitation.
- e. Why did you not tell it to me at first, says the monkey. I would have brought my heart with me. Usually I leave it at home.
- f. The porpoise carries him back to the land.

Type 150 *Advice of the Fox*¹⁵*Hebrew Version*¹⁶

- a. A bird would tell its hunter three maxims provided he lets her free.

¹³ L. Ginzberg "Ben Sira," *Jewish Encyclopedia* (New York, London, 1902), I, 680. A short comparative study of this tale see in Basil F. Kirtley "Remarks on the Origin and History of an 'Alphabet of Ben-Sira' fables," in *Studies in Biblical and Jewish Folklore*, eds. R. Patai, F. L. Utley, Dov Noy (Bloomington, 1960), pp. 29-37. For a yiddish version collected from Jewish immigrants in the United States, see N. Gross, *Tales and Parables*, (New York, 1955), pp. 423-24. This tale combines the Indian version of Type 52 of the sick lion, and type 91. A Jewish version from Bagdad see in Yoseph Haim, *God's Wonderful Deeds*, (Jerusalem, 1955), pp. 14-15, No. 11, A version from Palestinian Arabs, see in Setavi no. 6 pp. 50-54. Other Jewish versions, Bin Gorion, 1, 5-7 and L. Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, 1, 40-41.

¹⁴ N. M. Penzer, V, 127-130, An extensive comparative bibliography is included in note 1.

¹⁵ W. Wienert, E T 303.

¹⁶ M. Gaster, pp. 149-150, No. 390, Bin Gorion, VI, 12-15. The second

- b. The maxims : 1. Rue not a thing that is past.
2. Never believe what is beyond belief.
3. Never try to reach the unattainable.
- c. Immediately after he sets her free, the bird tells the hunter that she has an expensive stone within her body.
- d. The hunter climbs a tree to catch her and falls down, breaking his legs.
- c. The bird mocks the hunter for not following even a single maxim that he just heard.

*Indian Version*¹⁷

- a. A quail tells a fowler three maxims :
1. "Fast caught fast keep," never let a thing go once you have got it.
2. "He is a fool that believes everything he hears."
3. "It's of no use crying over spilt milk."
- b. The fourth thing the bird will tell the fowler only after he sets her free.
- c. After he does so, the bird tells him that she has a big diamond in her stomach.
- d. The fowler regrets his deed and by this, the bird pointed out, he has not obeyed even one maxim.

Type 155 *The Ungrateful Serpent Returned to Captivity*¹⁸

*Hebrew Version*¹⁹

- a. A man gives a snake a drink of milk.
- b. The snake shows him a treasure as a reward.
- c. As the man takes it, the snake coils around his neck, attempting to kill him.

version in this collection is a Hebrew translation of this tale's variant which appears in *The Prince and The Darvish*. See also L. Ginzberg. The tale was recorded in Israel from an informant from Turkey and is classified in Israel Folktale Archives (IFA) as No. 716.

¹⁷ William Crook and W. H. D. Rouk, *The Talking Trush*, 2nd ed. (London, New York, 1938), pp. 36-37. See also Benefy I, 380.

¹⁸ W. Wienert, No. 331.

¹⁹ M. Gaster, pp. 175-176. No. 441a. For another version in the same book, see No. 441b. For other Hebrew versions see L. Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, IV, 134-35, (V, 134-35, V.) 286, Note 31. Bin Gorion I, 89-91. An Yiddish version in English translation is included in the first collection of folktales in Yiddish, see M. Gaster, ed. *Miaseli Book* 2 vols. (Philadelphia, 1934), No. 144, p. 276-80, and a version collected among American Jews, see N. Gross *Tales and Parables*, pp. 55-54, 257-59. A version of this tale type, combined with Type 923B *The Princess Who was Responsible for her Own Fortune* is found in Dov Noy *Folktales of Israel* (Chicago, 1963), pp. 157-61, No. 57. Other related versions are classified in IFA as Nos. 185 (Tunisia), 107a (Yemen) and 1130 (Iraq).

- d. They come before King Solomon for Judgment.
- e. The King commands the snake to get down.
- f. He tells the man to stamp on the snake's head, following the Biblical verse of Genesis 3 : 15.

*Indian Version*²⁰

- a. A man saves a man-eating leopard from its hunters.
- b. After the danger has passed the leopard wants to eat the man.
- c. The man wants to ask three Judges.
 1. The water declines his case.
 2. The tree declines his case.
- d. The fox asks to examine how the leopard was hidden, and when he is put back into a sack, the fox tells the man to kill the leopard and then eat its corpse.

Type 160 *Grateful Animal : Ungrateful Man*

*Hebrew version*²¹

- a. A father, on his death bed, tells his son to help animal but not man.
- b. The son helps a snake, a dove and a man.
- c. The man is ungrateful and tries to deprive the son of his money by lying about him to the King.
- d. While in prison, the animals help the son to get out of his trouble, and reveal the truth.
- e. The ungrateful man is punished.

*Indian version*²²

- a. A benevolent magician encounters in one pit in the forest a lion, a golden crested bird, a snake, and a woman.
- b. His magic power is gone and he cannot rescue them by his usual means.
- c. He draws all of them out of the pit with a rope of grass.
- d. Each of them promises to help him if he is in trouble.
- e. The lion saves him from hunger and says "My curse is at an end" and it transforms into a Vidyadhara and departs.

²⁰ C. H. Bompas, ed., *Folklore of the Santal Parganas* (London, 1909), pp. 313-14; and see Benefy I, 113.

²¹ Dov Noy, *Folktales of Israel*, No. 29. Other version see in A. S. Rappoport, *The Folklore of the Jews*, (London,), pp. 141-44. A Hebrew version taken from *Kalilah and Dimnah*, see in Bin Gorion VI, 31-32. Six versions of this tale type have been collected in Israel : IFA 15 (Turkey) 41 (Tunisia) 268 (Palestine), 1193 (Palestine, Druze), 106 (Yemen), 834 (Yemen). For other tales about grateful animals see M. Gaster, p. 183, No. 316 and L. Ginzberg, V, 148.

²² N. M. Penzer, V, 157-164. An extensive bibliography has been prepared by Penzer.

- f. The golden-crested bird gives him a casket full of jewels, says the same as the lion and departs.
- g. The man meets the woman whom he saved, and tells her about his adventure.
- h. The woman, who is the queen's maid, tells this to her, since the bird has stolen the jewels from the queen.
- i. The king arrests the man.
- j. The serpent comes to his aid. He coils himself around the king and only the man can help the king.
- k. The serpent is transformed into a young hermit and tells the magician's adventure.

Type 293 *Debate of the Belly and the Members*

The tales cited in the references to this type in *The Types of the Folktales* (Helsinki, 1961) can be subdivided into three groups according to their main motif.

A. J461.1 "The Belly and the Members"²³

*Hebrew version*²⁴

- a. Mouth says to belly : all that I have 'robbed' I put into you.
- b. Three days after death belly bursts open and exclaims : Here is all that you have robbed.

B. J461.1.1 "Tail and Head of Serpent Quarrel as to Usefulness"²⁵

*Hebrew version*²⁶

- a. The serpent's tail says to its head : "I want to go first."
- b. The head lets it do so.
- c. The tail leads the serpent through water, fire, and thorns.

*Indian version*²⁷

- a. A snake has two heads, however, the one on the tail is blind.
- b. There is a quarrel between them about their priority.
- c. Once the tail-head catches hold of a piece of wood, and prevents the whole snake from going on.
- d. The snake begins to follow the tail-head which leads it into a fire in which it is burnt.
- C. J461.1.3 "Debate of Tongue and Other Bodily Members."

²³ W. Wienert E T 6.

²⁴ Fragmentary version found in *Midrash Rabbah, Genesis*, ed. and trans. H. Freedman and Maurice Simon (London, 1939), II, 995.

²⁵ W. Wienert E T 187.

²⁶ J. Rabbinowitz, *Midrash Rabba, Deuteronomy* (London, 1939), p. 9; 1 : 10. An Yiddish version is found in N. Gross, *Tales and Parables* p. 423.

²⁷ N. M. Penzer, V, 134-35.

*Hebrew version*²⁸

The tale illustrates the Biblical verse of Proverbs 18 : 21 "Death and life are in the power of the tongue."

- a. Doctors advise a sick Persian King that his only remedy is the milk of a lioness.
- b. The king sends a messenger to King Solomon. The bravest hero of the king brings the milk.
- c. On his way back, the messenger's members argue whose role was most important in fulfilling that task.
- d. The tongue says it is superior to all and sets out to prove it.
- e. On coming to the sick king's court, the tongue says : "I brought you a bitch's milk."
- f. The man is condemned to death, and his life is saved only after the tongue explains that "lioness" and "bitch" can be used as synonyms.

*Indian version*²⁹

- a. Man's senses argue as to who has the superiority among them.
- b. A brahman, who is asked to solve this problem, answers that the one whose departure from the body is most harmful to the rest of them is the superior.
- c. The tongue, the eye, the ear, the mind, the sperm, all leave the body for a year and come back.
- d. When the spirit of life is about to depart, it begins to uproot all other senses and they ask it to stay, recognizing its superiority.

Type 236A *The Ring of Polycaster**Hebrew version*³⁰

- a. A rich man is told that all his property will be transferred to his neighbour.
- b. He sells all his property and buys a big pearl which he keeps carefully in his headgear.
- c. One day, while crossing the bridge the wind blows his headgear into the water and a fish swallows the pearl.
- d. A fisherman catches that fish and Joseph Mokir Shabbat ("honourer of the Sabbath"), the neighbour buys it, finds the pearl, and sells it for 2300 golden dinars.

²⁸ M. J. Bin Gorion I, 110-11. L. Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, I, 174-5, VI, 302.

²⁹ Quoted from E. Bin Gorion, p. 109.

³⁰ M. Gaster, p. 81, No. 118, p. 114, No. 380; Bin Gorion, III, 63-64, M. Gaster Ed. *Maaseh Book*, No. 6, pp. 9-11.

Thompson-Roberts Type 948

*Indian version*³¹

This version has an interesting position in Indian-Jewish folkloristic relationships, since the hero of the tale is the Hebrew King Solomon.

- a. King Sulaiman lost his ring in the river.
- b. He called fairies and demons to help him.
- c. The demons told him the name of the man who caught that fish.
- d. The man tells that his daughter found the ring and she will give it back provided the king marries her, a condition the king gladly accepted.

Type 922A *Achikar**Hebrew version*

A. Yellin, *Book of Ahikar*, Hebrew, 1st ed., Berlin, 1923, 2nd ed. Jerusalem, 1938.

*Indian version*³²

U. P. Etahin, *North Indian Notes and Querries*, 5 vols. (1891-96), III, No. 211.

[To be continued *]

³¹ Sir Lucas King, "Folktales from the Panjab," *Folklore*, XXV, 1 (1924), 86-87. For a Jewish version of this tale with King Solomon as a hero see M. Gaster, pp. 155-56, No. 404, where an extensive bibliography is to be found. For relationships between King Solomon and demons see L. Ginzberg, *The Legend of the Jews*, IV, 123-76.

³² Neither the Indian nor the Hebrew version were available for me for contential comparison.

* The Paper is prepared for Dr. B. K. Barua.